Promoting a Particular View of Learner Autonomy Through an English Language Syllabus

Karin Macdonald

A particular view of learner autonomy for language learning and a syllabus to promote that view of autonomy are presented and discussed in this paper. The discussion is the result of an in-depth analysis of an existing* English language syllabus at Eszterházy Károly College in Eger, Hungary (Macdonald 2003). The intention of the analysis was to address the problem areas of the existing syllabus relating to the lack of opportunities currently available on the syllabus for student-centred negotiation and decision-making and to propose an alternative syllabus designed to support the promotion of learner autonomy in the context in question. Discussion here will show that the syllabus presented does support the view of autonomy put forward in this paper, and that the type of learner autonomy to be promoted and the syllabus created to incorporate that view of autonomy are justifiable as contextually appropriate proposals for the educational environment in question. However, further data collection and discussion are necessary within the specific department before implementation of the proposed syllabus to ensure the feasibility of the proposals. In addition, continued data collection and discussion are necessary during implementation in order to measure the viability of the proposals in practice, to measure how far learners actually increase their level of autonomy for language learning purposes and how far learners improve their English language ability as a result.

1 Introduction

This paper is an examination of the conclusions drawn from an in-depth analysis of an existing English language syllabus at Eszterházy Károly College in Eger, Hungary (Macdonald 2003). The analysis of the syllabus in question highlighted a number of problem areas, in particular those relating to the lack of opportunities currently available on the syllabus for student-centred negotiation and decision-making, and the analysis concluded that learner autonomy should be promoted in the setting in question through

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* References in this paper to the *existing* and *current* syllabus apply to the programme in the context in question at the time the research was conducted, namely 2002. In addition, the initial proposals presented here have recently been used as the basis for a new programme in the department. Data collection regarding outcomes is continuing.

an alternative syllabus. In order for the proposals for change to be both potentially beneficial and feasible in the environment under consideration, the wider social context of the educational setting, the norms of the institution in question, the teachers and the students involved were taken into account in deciding the type of learner autonomy to be promoted and in creating the proposed syllabus. As well as feedback data collected from teachers in the department in question, analysis was based on my own observations as teacher of the syllabus under examination. This paper will thus focus on the discussion surrounding the type of learner autonomy to be promoted in the specific higher education institution under examination and the syllabus designed to support that view of learner autonomy.

2 The Definition of Autonomy in Language Learning Appropriate for the Specific Context

Autonomy in language learning has become an increasingly accepted pedagogic goal in recent years and a variety of definitions regarding the notion exist, representing a number of perspectives on the matter. As Benson and Voller point out, "monolithic definitions of autonomy and independence have proved elusive, and it is perhaps more productive to speak of different versions of the concepts which correspond to different perspectives and circumstances" (1997b: 13). The definition of autonomy proposed for the context under examination in this paper is: **the promotion of the learner as an active participant in the language learning process within an instructed environment, where his/her active participation is to be encouraged through the development of the learner's ability to make decisions, think critically, work collaboratively and on an individual basis in a way which will help his/her studies in the educational setting in question.**

The fundamental principle behind the definition of autonomy offered here is the importance of the context within which autonomy is to be incorporated. Little's discussion of autonomy makes use of the term 'freedom' but he nevertheless recognises that these freedoms are conditional and constrained as, "our essential condition is one of interdependence" (1991: 5). In addition, Nunan highlights the important role that contextual factors play in defining autonomy by pointing out the following:

> There are different degrees of autonomy, and the extent to which it is feasible or desirable for learners to embrace autonomy will depend on a

range of factors to do with the personality of the learner, their goals in undertaking the study of another language, the philosophy of the institution (if any) providing the instruction, and the cultural context within which the learning takes place. (1996: 13)

He recognises that contextual variables will affect the version of autonomy to be promoted in a particular setting and they will affect whether that form of autonomy is both practicable and beneficial. Although Benson argues that, "autonomy is fundamentally concerned with the interests of learners, rather than the interests of those who require their skills" (2001: 21), by necessity, a definition of autonomy must acknowledge the interests that exist beyond the learners themselves. For example, there are clear economic reasons for learners to choose certain languages for particular contexts and the learners' priority may simply be to achieve success in those societal terms. Benson warns against the danger of autonomy being "viewed simply as a matter of consumer choice" (2001: 20) and it is indeed important to avoid a misinterpretation of autonomy which might encourage employers to save money on hiring teachers in the name of promoting the autonomous learner. However, as with any innovation, contextual factors are an essential consideration, as the effective implementation of innovation depends on it being acceptable to all those involved (Nicholls 1983), which includes the learners, teachers and the institution, who are all in turn influenced by the wider cultural setting.

The definition of autonomy presented in this paper promotes the learner as an active participant in the language learning process within an instructed environment. This statement attempts to address the concern expressed by myself and other teachers with regards to our observations of learners who sit in classes as passive recipients of presented information and display an apparent reluctance and/or inability to voice opinions and contribute effectively to their learning in and out of class. This part of the definition is loosely related to Holec's definition of autonomy which he describes as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (1981: 3), as 'taking charge' does suggest positive action on the part of the learners. Active participation is used here instead, however, to underline the fact that the learners are expected to be active members of a group of learners within an instructed environment. The statement therefore recognises the contributions learners can make whilst nevertheless accepting the need for continued guidance on the part of the teacher.

The difference between the definition here and Holec's is mainly in terms of the level of control the learners are likely to have. Holec's definition resulted from his report on the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, which was concerned with adult lifelong learning. His

definition therefore addresses the need for those adult learners to take full responsibility for the content and organisation of their learning. For the instructed setting in question here, the learners' level of control will change and develop as their studies progress but they are unlikely to gain full control of all aspects of their studies due to the requirements and demands of the educational institution of which they are members. Nunan's levels of autonomy are a helpful reference point for the innovation proposals in this paper. The autonomy proposals for the syllabus in question are similar to levels one and two on Nunan's scale: level one being concerned with raising learners' awareness of pedagogic goals and content of the materials they are using and level two allowing learner involvement in the selection of their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer (1997: 195). It is important to note, however, that these levels of autonomy are general guidelines only as the levels will differ from learner to learner and according to the particular task at hand.

'Active participation' therefore reflects a view of autonomy specific to a particular educational setting where the level of autonomy is constrained but appropriate for that setting. 'Active participation' also reflects a philosophy of learning where learners work in cooperation with each other and their teachers. Kohonen describes cooperative learning as a situation where learners work to accomplish shared goals (1992: 33) and "the extent to which the decisions are taken together reflects a shared management of learning, with the teacher functioning as guide and expert consultant of learning" (1992: 32). His experiential model allows a more learner-centred approach in language instruction but acknowledges the roles the learners as a group and the teacher can play in 'positive interdependence' (1992: 34). Kohonen's summary of experiential learning is directly in line with the view of autonomy here as he states that personal awareness and responsibility are part of autonomous learning but "personal decisions are made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions and expectations" (1992: 19). The definition for autonomy offered here concerns the development of the learners' ability to work collaboratively and on an individual basis in a way which will help his/her studies in the educational setting in question. This therefore argues in favour of a learner-centred approach but where a learner's autonomous decisions are made in positive cooperation with the expected norms of the educational setting. Language classes should therefore give the learner plenty of opportunities for interactive communication and for reflection on the language itself, on ways of learning, and on the learners' progress.

In addition, learners' active participation, as described so far, needs to be supported through the development of the ability to make decisions and

think critically, an essential part of the definition of autonomy offered here. Ridley argues in favour of developing learners' thinking skills and states that learners need to develop the ability to reflect both on the learning process as a whole and on individual tasks, for planning, monitoring or evaluation purposes (1997: 1). Referring to students in a higher education setting, Heron also argues that a learner needs "the capacity to learn, the capacity to know how to learn, the capacity to know that he has learned" (1988: 78). Little defines autonomy as "a capacity—for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making" (1991: 4) but, although similar, the definition in this paper goes further in underlining the argument that the decision-making process does not occur randomly but takes place within the constraints of a particular context.

The promotion of learner autonomy, as defined here, is also dependent on the role of the teachers involved in the language programme in question. An atmosphere of 'positive interdependence' between learners and teachers means that teachers will need to allow learners to play an active part in some of the decisions regarding their learning. The definition of autonomy here particularly favours the teacher's role as facilitator, as it is associated with motivating learners, raising learners' awareness, and helping learners to plan and carry out learning and to evaluate themselves effectively (Voller 1997: 102). The role of counsellor is also a useful one in the higher education setting in question as it refers to one-to-one interaction for consultation and guidance (Voller 1997: 103–104). The view of autonomy in this paper also favours collaboration between teachers, mirroring interdependent roles in the classroom. Collaboration in the context in question will involve coordinating elements of teaching to ensure continuity across the programme, negotiating possible changes and sharing ideas and materials. This might resemble a, "Coordinated Team Type" of team teaching where there is some joint planning by teachers teaching the same curriculum to different learners (Bailey et al. 1992: 163).

The definition of autonomy developed for the college in question is a contextually constrained one and is appropriate only for a specific educational setting. However, this raises the question whether the type of learner autonomy to be promoted here can actually be referred to as the promotion of 'autonomy' in language learning. The fact that "autonomy is not a single, easily described behaviour" (Little 1991: 7) means that certain aspects of autonomy will be emphasised in different contexts. Benson discusses three versions of autonomy: technical, psychological and political (1997: 19). He refers to technical versions as those involved in equipping learners with the skills and techniques for taking charge of their learning. The psychological versions, on the other hand, are concerned with

developing a capacity which allows learners to take responsibility for their learning. Finally, he refers to the political versions in terms of control over the processes and content of learning (1997: 19).

The definition of autonomy here draws on aspects of all three versions of autonomy described by Benson, though the psychological version is emphasised the most. For example, the reference to the learner as an active participant as part of the definition here is concerned with developing the learner's ability to be proactive in the learning process and thus to take more responsibility. In addition, the reference to learner development in terms of critical thinking skills etc. in the definition concerns "an internal transformation within the individual" (Benson 1997: 19) evident in psychological versions, but also involves equipping learners with the skills necessary to take more responsibility, similar to technical versions. Furthermore, the reference to collaboration, critical thinking and decision-making in the definition could be interpreted as involving control over content and learning processes, as suggested by a political version of autonomy. The proposed syllabus designed to support the view of learner autonomy here does interpret autonomy to include elements of negotiation and control over some content and processes such as personal learning styles and strategies.

The definition is thus justifiable in its representation of *a type* of learner autonomy. However, as a teacher at the institution in question, my concern regarding the language programme is both for the learners and the institution itself, and the type of learner autonomy offered is actually intended to benefit both parties. It is therefore clear that the learner autonomy here contrasts with the other uses of the word 'autonomy' in language education, which include situations in which learners study entirely on their own, a belief in the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning, a belief in an inborn capacity which is *suppressed* by institutional education, and self-directed learning (Benson and Voller 1997a: 1–2). The version of autonomy presented here is appropriate to a traditional instructed environment, where resources are limited for self-directed learning and where learners' and teachers' first concern lies with succeeding within the accepted standards of the institution. The advantage of the definition lies in the fact that it does not accept 'autonomy' as an unquestionably desirable goal which becomes "yet another version of the free, enlightened, liberal West bringing one more form of supposed emancipation to the unenlightened, traditional, backward and authoritarian classrooms of the world" (Pennycook 1997: 43). The definition in fact offers a clear direction for both students and teachers, drawing on aspects of other

versions of autonomy but appropriate for the educational setting for which it is designed.

3 Designing a Syllabus for the Promotion of Learner Autonomy in the Specific Context

3.1 Establishing Syllabus Type

The relevant department of the higher education institution in question currently has an, "interventionist approach which gives priority to the pre-specification of linguistic or other content or skills objectives" (White 1988: 45) for all the syllabuses in operation there. The tradition of the institution prioritises a teacher directed approach as part of a linear curriculum model, where the aims of the course are specified, the content is selected and organised and where evaluation takes place according to whether the aims have been achieved (Nunan 1988: 12). However, this is in direct contrast to syllabuses normally associated with learner autonomy, as learner autonomy "has been formalised in the idea of the process syllabus, in which learners are expected to make the major decisions concerning content and procedures of learning" (Benson 2001: 163).

A process syllabus is typified by the fact that "selection and grading of communicative activities has been replaced by negotiating and planning of larger tasks which dictate their own content and the specific enabling skills that each student will need to achieve the task" (Gray 1990: 262). However, Clarke (1991) strongly questions the feasibility of implementing a fully negotiated syllabus into most teaching circumstances. He sums up the problems associated with such a syllabus as follows:

> Quite apart from difficulties engendered by the diversity of cultural expectations concerning the nature of a syllabus and the realistic demands of education authorities for a predetermined statement of objectives and means of reaching those objectives, there exists the equally problematic area of how consensus might be achievable amongst participants on a particular course. (1991: 19)

The introduction of a process syllabus into a traditional institution would make heavy demands on the teaching staff in terms of managing groups of learners, organising banks of materials and being willing to relinquish duties normally associated with teachers (Clarke 1991: 20–21). In addition, the learners themselves may not be ready or willing to take on roles that they see as more appropriate for their teachers, particularly in a system where assessment processes are imposed on learners and where "a student's sense of self as a learner is most often constructed against evaluative criteria

over which they have no control and through a process in which they have virtually no negotiating rights" (Breen and Mann 1997: 138).

On the other hand, the incorporation of project work, most associated with a 'weak' version of the process syllabus (Benson 2001: 165), could help to promote the form of autonomy presented in section 2 of this paper. The definition of autonomy already established includes the promotion of collaborative learning in an atmosphere of positive interdependence, and as Johnson and Johnson state, "positive interdependence exists when one perceives that one is linked with others in a way so that one cannot succeed unless they do ... and/or that one must coordinate one's efforts with the efforts of others to complete a task" (1990: 27). Indeed, project work by its nature "requires learning groups, whose members collaboratively seek outcomes that are beneficial to all those with whom they are cooperatively connected" (Legutke and Thomas 1991: 219–220). Dam (1995) carried out project work in a formal educational institution in Denmark and devised a planning model to prioritise such work. She claims that her procedures have led her school-aged learners to develop both an overall awareness of language learning processes and an awareness of personal possibilities and responsibilities within these processes (1995: 80). However, a completely project-based process syllabus is not predetermined but develops in character during the course and the burden on teachers is therefore heavy in terms of effecting programme continuity (Legutke and Thomas 1991: 240).

The burden of organisation and the lack of prespecified syllabus content of both the 'weak' and 'strong' versions of the process syllabus types discussed so far would seriously hinder their effective implementation in the institutional department in question. The implementation of a syllabus is "closely bound up with particular social and cultural settings" (Brumfit 1984a: 77) and the definition of autonomy established in section 2 is shaped by contextual factors as "the extent to which autonomy can be developed is constrained by a broad range of personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural factors" (Nunan 1997: 203). A solution such as that offered by Clarke (1991) with regards to syllabus design would therefore seem more appropriate than a process syllabus. He suggests a mixed syllabus solution where features of process syllabuses are incorporated into a predetermined framework, where learners are involved in some decision-making processes such as evaluating particular materials and tasks or negotiating ways that they may prefer to work or methods of assessment (1991: 24–25). A "conventional syllabus-as-inventory" (McCarthy and Carter 2001: 61) type of syllabus in line with the college requirements will therefore be proposed for the language programme in question but it is through the syllabus

content specifications that learner autonomy, as it is viewed here, will be promoted.

3.2 The Proposed Syllabus for Language Practice Units 1 to 4

3.2.1 The Aims of the Proposed Syllabus

The Language Practice (LP) semester 'blocks' have aims and content specific to each semester and for the purposes of this paper, the aims and content specifications are for LP units 1 to 4 only. The specific aims for LP units 1 to 4 are concerned with meeting the needs of new students and their progress in the first semester of the first year at the college. These aims are as follows:

• to help learners prepare for their English medium studies at the college and adjust to college life;

• to raise learners' awareness of pedagogical goals, the content of materials being learned, preferred learning styles and strategies;

• to involve learners actively in the learning process by providing opportunities to make choices regarding activities in and out of class;

• to give learners opportunities to work collaboratively and individually, and be supported in their differing roles;

• to explore language at the level of discourse to gain greater insight into different text types, media and the role of context in language use.

3.2.2 Specifications of the Proposed Syllabus

The syllabus covers a 13 week period (weeks shown in figure 1, column 1). Topics serve to contextualise skill-based and communicative activities and the themes change every two weeks across the units (shown in figure 1, column 2). The level of student active participation and level of involvement in decision-making is increased as the units progress. For example: whole class negotiation occurs in LP unit 3 regarding task choice from week 8 (figure 1, column 5); small groups of students collaborate to choose a specific focus for project work in LP unit 2 from week 10 (figure 1, column 4); and students choose and prepare on an individual basis for the focus of oral presentations in LP unit 4 (figure 1, column 6). However, despite the increase in student active participation on LP units 1 to 4, student choice of tasks and topics is still relatively restricted. This is in line with the belief that learner autonomy needs to be built up gradually and students need to be supported in becoming increasingly autonomous. Therefore, as LP units 1 to 4 address the needs of first year students in their first semester, only a small range of tasks are offered as choices on LP unit 3, and project work and oral presentations are limited to the themes featured in the last four weeks of the syllabus.

Figure 1 Proposed Syllabus for LP Units 1 to 4 *Key: Wk = Week*

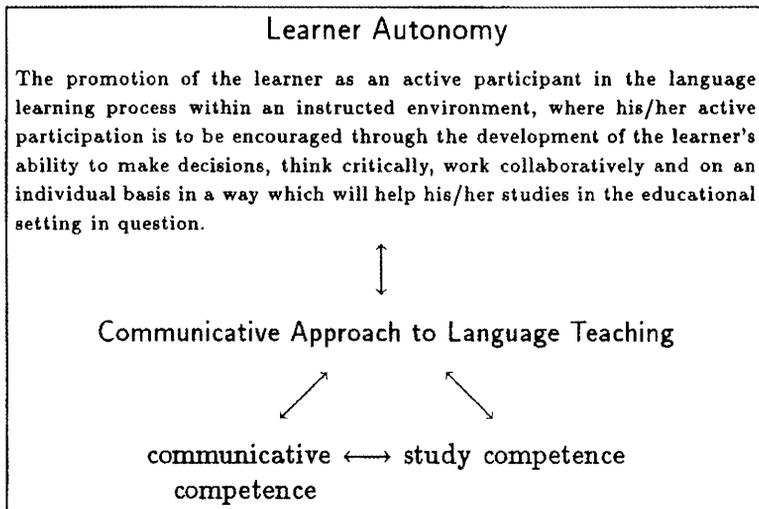| Wk	Topics	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
1	Introduction to College Life	(Negotiated with other LP Teaching Staff)	(Negotiated with other LP Teaching Staff)	(Negotiated with other LP Teaching Staff)	(Negotiated with other LP Teaching Staff)
2	Travel and Tourism	Finding Information	Reading Strategies: Predicting/ Skimming/ Scanning	Listening Strategies: Predicting/ Language Functions	Developing Thinking Skills
3		Taking and Making Notes	Reading Strategies: Specific Information	Note-Taking from Listening	Asking Critical Questions
4	The Arts and Entertainment	Academic Writing: Establishing Focus	Vocabulary Strategies: Reading	Listening Discourse Functions	Asking Critical Questions
5		Academic Writing: Narrowing Focus and Planning	Finding Information: Dictionaries	Note-Taking from Listening	Seminar Discussion Strategies
6	Environment and Health	Academic Writing: Paragraphs	Extensive Reading: English for Academic Purposes	Listening Practice: Strategies	Discourse Analysis: Speech vs. Writing
7		Academic Writing: Summarising and Paraphrasing	Extensive Reading: English for Academic Purposes	Vocabulary Development Strategies	Speaking for Academic Purposes: Presentations
8	News and Media	Academic Writing: Text Cohesion Techniques	Text Cohesion: Analysis	Listening Practice (collective student task choice)	Organising Oral Presentations
9		Text Genres and Appropriate Register	Text Genres and Appropriate Register: Analysis	Communicative Tasks (collective student task choice)	Organising Oral Presentations
10	English as a Global Language	Contrastive rhetoric	Project Work (negotiated with students)	Listening Practice (collective student task choice)	Oral Presentations (student topic choice)
11		Proof Reading Strategies	Project Work (negotiated with students)	Communicative Tasks (collective student task choice)	Oral Presentations (student topic choice)
12	Hungary: Past, Present and Future	Conventions of Academic Writing	Project Work (negotiated with students)	Listening Practice (collective student task choice)	Oral Presentations (student topic choice)
13		Conventions of Academic Writing	Project Work (negotiated with students)	Communicative Tasks (collective student task choice)	Oral Presentations (student topic choice)

The proposed syllabus essentially prioritises the development of skills where "learning to do something *with* or *through* language is the primary objective" (Yalden 1988: 34). The skills featured are those involved with English for general academic purposes (Blue 1988) as the course is concerned with developing students' general study competence in preparation for their English degree course. Most of the syllabus presented in this paper is prespecified but there are elements to be negotiated between teachers and learners. Opportunities are given to learners to collaborate with each other and work on an individual basis.

The topics (figure 1, column 2) are intended to stimulate discussion and provide a platform to develop students' critical thinking skills, providing a bridge between study on LP units and subject specialist related studies in

semester 2. The topics have also been chosen to coincide with topics covered by the main textbook, Jones (1998), and other material already available at the college. In addition, the existing academic writing textbook, Oshima and Hogue (1991), can still be used to develop student writing skills and written discourse analysis.

Current practice at the college is for teachers to be assigned to one unit and teach all groups that unit (usually four different groups of students). First semester first year students are thus exposed to four different teachers in a week (i.e. LP units 1 to 4) and they can therefore experience different styles of teaching, ways of speaking etc. Planning time for the teachers is also saved, as essentially the same lesson is taught more than once in a week by the same teacher. Due to the existence of these norms, the four LP units are treated as separate entities, but analysis of the existing syllabus has revealed a lack of cohesion resulting from such treatment in the past. The issue of cohesion between the units is therefore addressed on the proposed syllabus by contextualising language work and using the same topic areas across the units and by repeating some discourse-based themes. Collaboration among the teachers is a prerequisite for the implementation of the alternative syllabus as the units need to be managed as a cohesive whole and teachers will need to consult each other, share materials etc.

Figure 2 Principles upon which Proposals are based

Learner Autonomy

The promotion of the learner as an active participant in the language learning process within an instructed environment, where his/her active participation is to be encouraged through the development of the learner's ability to make decisions, think critically, work collaboratively and on an individual basis in a way which will help his/her studies in the educational setting in question.

Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

communicative ⟷ study competence
competence

3.3 Principles on Which the Proposed Syllabus is Based

The principles governing the proposed syllabus are summarised in figure 2. Autonomy is the main principle at the top of the diagram and is to be promoted through a communicative paradigm, which in turn is intended to develop students' communicative competence and study competence. The diagram thus shows the hierarchical nature of the principles. The arrows point in two directions, however, to show the interdependency of the principles in the context in question. The fundamental guiding principle behind the language programme on the proposed syllabus is therefore the definition of autonomy presented in section 2. Through that definition it is recognised that learners in a higher educational institution are presupposed to have "the intellectual competence to acquire a fully rational grasp of a particular discipline or subject area" (Heron 1988: 78), but need to be supported in the organisation of their studies and their learning with a more learner-centred approach to language teaching and learning through the proposed syllabus.

The promotion of autonomy, as it is defined here, is to be achieved through a communicative paradigm for teaching and learning English at the college. Teachers at the college have already adopted communicative language teaching methods for the implementation of English language practice units. The communicative approach is supported to some extent by the existing syllabus through the specification of themes and functions and is reflected in the choice of main textbook for English units in the first year. To illustrate, Jones (1998), the main textbook used in the department, is designed to practice all four language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing, and includes a number of 'Communication Activities' (1998: 5). As Breen and Candlin state, "The use of (these) communicative abilities is manifested in communicative performance through a set of skills. Speaking, listening, reading and writing skills can be seen to serve and depend upon the underlying abilities of interpretation, expression and negotiation" (1980: 92). Language teachers at the college thus make use of materials and methods that support communicative language teaching principles. The teachers' existing familiarity with such methods is an advantage as the communicative paradigm serves as a useful base to promote the view of autonomy here. As Breen and Candlin argue, in a communicative curriculum, "the implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way" (1980: 100). Therefore the alternative syllabus is based on a view of teaching and learning in line with the communicative approach that:

- concentrates on language use and appropriacy as well as form;

- uses activities that are fluency-focused rather than simply accuracy-focused;
- limits the use of exercises *on* the language and encourages the achievement of communicative task objectives *through* the language;
- emphasises student interaction and limits teacher-centred approaches (Maley 1986: 88–89).

In addition, two types of learner competence are to be developed through the proposed syllabus: communicative competence and study competence. The notion of communicative competence has a number of different definitions but for the purposes of the new syllabus it is based on the categories identified by Canale and Swain (1980) and summarised by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain as follows:

(1) Linguistic or grammatical competence, which consists of the basic elements of communication: sentence patterns, morphological inflections, lexical resources, and phonological or orthographic systems.

(2) Sociolinguistic competence, which consists of the social and cultural knowledge required to use language appropriately with reference to formality, politeness and other contextually defined choices.

(3) Discourse competence, which involves the selection, sequencing, and arrangement of words, structures, and sentences/utterances to achieve a unified spoken or written whole with reference to a particular message and context.

(4) Strategic competence, which includes the strategies and procedures relevant to language learning, language processing, and language production. It activates knowledge of the other competencies and helps language users compensate for gaps or deficiencies in knowledge when they communicate. (2000: 16)

Communicative competence is therefore interpreted as involving the use of language as well as aspects of grammatical accuracy. The importance of dealing with language at a discourse level is an essential element in the interpretation of communicative competence here. As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain state, "it is in discourse and through discourse that all of the other competencies are realised. And it is through discourse that the manifestation of other competencies can best be observed, researched, and assessed" (2000: 16).

Study competence, on the other hand, is intended to address the particular needs of students in higher education. In a recent study of Hungarian university students studying English to degree level, it was found that students mainly use their English for study purposes during their degree course (Kormos et al. 2002). Although the research relates to university

level students, Hungarian university courses for English have a very similar structure in terms of options and type of work to the college of higher education in question and the research also confirms my own observations of student language needs at the college.

In order for (study) skills to be effectively taken up and adapted by the learners, Waters and Waters (1992) argue, however, that there is a need to develop an underlying study competence. According to Waters and Waters, teaching study skills techniques without addressing an underlying capacity for study does not necessarily result in the successful use of techniques. They argue that it is necessary to address deeper levels of processing which involve the development of students' logical thinking, critical questioning, self-awareness etc. (1992). They state, for example, that teaching a student the technique of note-taking is not enough as he/she will not be able to take *effective* notes unless the task is approached at a deeper level as well (1992: 267). In addition, developing study competence is a possible way to access the private domain of a student. Crabbe (1993) distinguishes between the public domain of shared activities in the classroom, and the private domain of learning, the place where a learner's personal learning occurs. He argues that it is necessary for the public domain task to have relevance to the private domain as "learners need to perceive the elements of the task that are conducive to their learning and to perceive how they might manage the task or a similar task for themselves, possibly by themselves" (1993: 445). The tasks he suggests involve classroom negotiation on such aspects as the aims of tasks, the difficulties in completing tasks and how tasks might effectively be tackled (1993: 450). Waters and Waters (1995) suggest tasks to develop study competence which have a similar interactional element to Crabbe's examples and include awareness-building tasks, problem-solving tasks and tasks involving critical analysis.

4 Evaluation of the Proposed Syllabus with Regards to Whether it Promotes the View of Learner Autonomy Presented for the Context in Question

According to the type of autonomy to be promoted, the syllabus framework must provide opportunities for students to develop their decision-making and thinking skills, cooperate with each other and their teachers, and work effectively on their own, in support of college language learning requirements in order to fulfill its role in promoting the particular view of learner autonomy presented here.

The learner as an 'active participant' in the language learning process is supported by incorporating elements of learner development into the

proposed syllabus. For example, strategies for language learning are included, and as Oxford and Nyikos point out, "cognitive psychology shows that learning strategies help learners to assimilate new information into their own existing mental structures or schemata, thus creating increasingly rich and complex schemata" (1989: 291). According to Chamot and Rubin, strategy development is most effective, however, if teachers find out about the strategies already used by the students and discuss them; then present new strategies, naming and describing them openly; model the strategies; give reasons for using the new strategies and explain when they can be used; and then provide opportunities to extensively practise the strategies (1994: 773). They state, "the evidence describing usage and intervention in both L1 contexts and L2 learning leads us to feel confident that such instruction, properly carried out, can positively assist language learners to become actively engaged in their own learning processes" (1994: 774). It is also important to emphasise that a number of variables exist, such as learner, context, task, teacher and text that affect the success of strategy instruction in helping language learning (Chamot and Rubin 1994: 774). Furthermore, Rees-Miller warns against students feeling pressured to use particular strategies chosen by the teacher and feeling stigmatised or patronised for choosing some strategies over others (1994: 779).

The strategies particularly emphasised on the proposed syllabus are those directly related to college level English requirements, such as strategies for extensive reading, skimming and scanning texts, strategies for dealing with unknown vocabulary in texts, planning strategies and proof-reading strategies. The assumption here is that students' immediate needs arriving at the college are to adjust to college life and prepare for the specialist subject English-medium seminars later in the academic year. The intention is to equip students with the capacity to actively participate in their English-medium studies through learner development of study techniques.

In addition, students' underlying capacity for study needs to be developed if study techniques are to be used effectively. Developing learners' study competence through the proposed syllabus is a principle in line with the definition of learner autonomy established here. The assumption is that the development of study competence involves the development of learners' critical thinking skills. It is the intention of the proposed syllabus that study techniques are explored through a number of engaging tasks such as those which require learners to solve problems, consider different options and ask appropriate questions. Study techniques, together with an underlying study competence, can be genuinely developed through the incorporation of project work and oral presentations on the proposed syllabus. Students are required to use a number of study techniques in an effective way to plan,

structure and complete such work and have to use critical thinking skills and decision-making skills to do so. Furthermore, the work incorporates and develops other general language learning strategies involving the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, as well as affective and strategic strategies during oral presentations, for example.

The proposed syllabus also provides students with the opportunity to interact through negotiation and collaboration. For example, students need to make collective decisions regarding communicative task choice in LP unit 3 (figure 1, column 5); student collaboration and student/teacher collaboration is necessary for group project work; and students work individually on oral presentations, but nevertheless need to collaborate with their teachers on the focus of the presentation, material collection etc. Opportunities for collaboration and working individually are therefore provided on the syllabus, in line with the view of learner autonomy to be promoted here. In addition, the implication of a communicative approach to language teaching and learning is that language can be described at a discourse level (McDonough and Shaw 1993: 33) and the added dimension of a "top-down" approach (Cook 1989: 79) to language learning further equips learners with the ability to analyse and understand language and thus increases the learner's chance to play an active role in the whole process. Opportunities for just such an approach have been provided on the proposed syllabus in the incorporation of discourse topics such as the analysis of text genre, appropriacy and register, and contrastive rhetoric (figure 1).

Evaluation of the proposed syllabus so far would thus suggest that the framework presented does in fact support the view of learner autonomy established here. The proposed syllabus has the potential to develop students' decision-making and thinking skills through activities that demand collaboration as well as individual effort and the type of skills and strategies included on the syllabus are intended to help students in the college language learning environment.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present and examine a particular view of learner autonomy and a syllabus that supports that view as developed through an in-depth analysis of an existing English language syllabus at a specific college of higher education in Hungary. The challenge to be met was the creation of a viable version of learner autonomy for the setting in question and then to construct a realisable syllabus for its promotion. Discussion has shown that the type of learner autonomy to be promoted and the syllabus created to incorporate that view of autonomy are justifiable as contextually

appropriate proposals for the educational environment in question and that the syllabus presented does indeed support that view of autonomy.

However, a syllabus cannot define learning but only provides an accessible framework which can influence teaching, though it cannot actually control the teaching (Brumfit 1984a: 76). It cannot therefore be assumed that the implementation of the proposed syllabus will automatically result in the students becoming active participants in their learning through the implementation of the proposed syllabus. Once the proposed syllabus has been implemented, it is necessary for the teachers involved with the syllabus to establish a means to measure how far the syllabus does in practice support the definition of learner autonomy; whether students are indeed becoming active participants in their learning with the ability to think critically, work collaboratively and on an individual basis; and whether the promotion of learner autonomy results in more effective language learning. Furthermore, a means to record problems arising with regards to feasibility in the setting in question needs to be established. Measurement during the process of implementation might be possible through teacher observation of learner participation in class, questionnaires and interviews with learners regarding their own perceptions and the possible use of learner diaries to evaluate their involvement in decisions, their discussion of strategy use and their comments on cooperative learning and working individually.

In addition, further data collection and departmental discussion is necessary before the proposals can be effectively instigated, implemented and evaluated within the department in question. For example, before the proposed syllabus is implemented, further data collection would be necessary to ensure the feasibility of the proposals. Questions for data collection should explore opinions on the existing syllabus as well as the proposed syllabus in detail and all teachers involved with the language programme need to contribute to the data collection process. Future data collection should also include student questionnaires in line with the learner-centred nature of the proposals. Through careful planning and management of the alternative syllabus, it is hoped that the implementation of the proposals will benefit not only the students involved but also the teachers, the department and the institution itself.

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